Do educational practitioners invest in specialised discourses of autism? Professional knowledge landscapes of teachers and teaching assistants in mainstream schools

Abstract

A key metaphor used to describe the complexity of what teachers do is that of professional knowledge landscapes. This conveys the idea that effective practice should be explored in relation to how teachers perceive pupils, but also to how teachers see themselves and questions of professional identity. The research reported here was part of a larger study into inclusive pedagogy for autistic pupils. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was applied to transcripts of semi-structured interviews with mainstream practitioners (n=8) to identify constructions about practice. Findings show that specialised knowledge about autism was welcomed, but effective practice was seen to be based wholly on ongoing interactions with pupils and did not differ from practices used with other pupils. Findings from this research contest the idea that mainstream practitioners simply fall short in adopting certain practices for autistic pupils and indicate they have practices of their own which are aligned with ideas about inclusive education.

Introduction

Professional knowledge in education involves both declarative knowledge (what to teach) as well as procedural knowledge (how to teach it) (Lambert and Biddulph 2015). Teachers enact official educational policy in consideration of their pupils and what they bring to learning spaces, making continual assessments of how pupils are engaging with learning, what they know and what they understand. Teachers are described as translators of the curriculum who make judgements about what to teach in the light of their pupils' ability to access learning (Alvunger et al. 2017). In carrying out their practice, teachers adopt different positions on knowledge, sometimes orientating themselves in terms of past actions, existing ideas and official policy, but often making rapid, more intuitive judgements that stem from an orientation to the current conditions of the classroom (Priestley et al. 2015). It is notable that these different sources of professional knowledge are interactive and make teaching a highly complex process and sensitive to the intricacies of cultural contexts and teacher-pupil relationships (Elwood and Murphy 2015).

A key metaphor that has been used to describe the complexity of what teachers do is that of professional knowledge landscapes (Clandinin and Connelly 1996). This metaphor conveys not only the idea that teaching has dimensionality in terms of space and time, but also that teachers inhabit different places within a more expansive professional backdrop populated by others. Clandinin et al. (2006) describe professional knowledge in education as deeply personal and formed through the dialectic of everyday experiences of teaching and wider social and political influences. They note that teaching practice involves an orientation to the pupil and the asking of questions about what they need in terms of actions, but how teachers see themselves, including what they know, what they are able to do and what they are accountable for, will determine their perspective on pupils' needs and how they respond to these. Wenger-Trayner et al. (2015), also writing about professional knowledge landscapes, highlight the central issue of identity and describe it in this way:

> Learning to become a practitioner is not best understood as approximating better and better a reified body of knowledge. Rather it is developing a meaningful identity of both competence and knowledgeability in a dynamic and varied landscape of relevant practices.
>
> (Wenger-Trayner et al. 2015: page 23)

For these authors, discursive practices are central to understanding how practitioners construct professional knowledge landscapes, including how they position themselves as competent and able to manage the tensions that exist between different, but related communities of practice. Teaching should not be considered in terms of a landscape of a single community of practice, however, but of different and diverse landscapes of practice that are in conflict and necessitate careful negotiation and crossing of boundaries. Wenger-Trayner et al. point out that competency as a professional resides in engaging in and reflecting on practice, but also in being able to coordinate one's actions, perspectives and interpretations to what is seen to be useful in practice and in being recognised as doing this by one's professional peers.

Autism is described as a developmental disability that affects how the individual experiences the world and relates to other people (NAS 2016). The

difficulties that individuals face, however, are increasingly seen as shared, with difficulty in understanding experienced by both autistic and non-autistic communicative partners (Crompton 2019; Milton 2012). Autistic pupils constitute the largest group in UK schools with a statement of special educational needs or education, health and care plan (DfE 2019; Welsh Government 2018), but are thought to be particularly difficult to include (Thomas et al. 2019) and to be let down by the education system (APPGA 2017). Recommendations for practice call for greater application of specialist knowledge and specialised practices to non-specialist mainstream settings, where the majority of autistic pupils are educated. This is described in terms of mainstream teachers and teaching assistants visiting special schools and specialist autism support teams going in to mainstream settings to provide advice (APPGA 2017). The discourse is one of a hierarchical approach to knowledge exchange, however, with little consideration given to teachers' professional knowledge and identities, how they see themselves as competent and accountable, and the context-specific or situated nature of learning (Guldberg 2016).

The study reported here sought to investigate educational practices that support learning and development for autistic pupils in mainstream schools. In order to embrace the contextualised and complex nature of teaching, investigation was of both the actions that supported learning, but also how practices were constructed, what identities existed and what ideas were drawn on by practitioners. Engaging with the personal in teaching was thought to be critically important as a way of more fully understanding the complexities of professional knowledge, but also of questioning the assumption that mainstream teachers should simply identify with specialists in autism and seek to apply what they know.

Methods

The aim of the research was to gather information about naturally occurring teacher-pupil interactions whilst engaging practitioners and pupils more fully within the research process. Research questions addressed how learning interactions unfolded and what teaching strategies were employed by practitioners to support autistic pupils, but also how practitioners made sense of their practice. An underpinning rationale for the research was that it was focused on effective practice with a key criterion for

recruitment being that practitioners were working with a pupil who was considered to be achieving well and flourishing within the mainstream setting. Five pupil case studies were developed in four mainstream primary schools in the south-west region of the UK, with adult participants including class teachers, teaching assistants, a special needs teacher and a special educational needs coordinator (SENCO) (*n*=8). Following ethical approval from the researcher's University, an extended period of consent took place which involved several face-to-face meetings with gatekeepers and potential participants to explain the purpose of the project and answer any questions. As a way of building trust and ensuring the credibility of the research, practitioners and pupils were asked to gather information about learning interactions themselves, identifying sessions to video record and deciding which to forward to the researcher.

Formal interviews and informal conversations with practitioners, which were focused on how practitioners made sense of their practice and supported by viewing transcripts and selections of the video data, were also carried out. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was applied to practitioner reflections on practice in interviews and are presented here. IPA is an approach to data analysis that seeks to allow experience to be expressed in its own terms rather than according to a pre-given set of categories (Smith et al. 2009). This was felt to be important to this research since the aim was to investigate how practitioners position themselves within a professional knowledge landscape, without imposing any ideas about the 'correctness' of this. The process of analysis involved adding exploratory comments to one side of a transcribed interview, including comments that described content or highlighted the use of language. These comments were then organised into superordinate themes with further researcher interpretations made at this point. Interpretations sought to understand participants' perspectives and connect these to formal extant ideas represented in relevant literature (Smith et al. 2009).

Findings

Four superordinate themes emerged from data analysis. The first of these focused on professional identities and the ways in which participants saw themselves as competent. Connected to this, a second superordinate theme concerned sources of knowledge about practice and the ways in which practice shaped the development of

professional knowledge. Two further themes emerged in relation to underpinning principles of educational practice as evidenced in practitioner accounts, and to how inclusive practice and pupil progress were conceptualised in relation to these principles. Findings organised according to these four themes are set out below.

Mainstream practitioners identify weakly with expertise on autism but strongly with being effective educators

Several practitioners expressed a belief that support and training from external specialists on autism and visits to special schools had been pivotal in helping them to understand more about autism in the early stages of working with a pupil. Identification with becoming an expert on autism was weak, however, in the sense that no one at any point described themselves as having specialised knowledge, even though some had many years of experience of working with pupils on the spectrum. The identity of 'someone who knows about autism' was complex. Participants positioned themselves as someone who had 'come to know', especially in relation to knowing about the uniqueness of the child with whom they worked. Many commented that the pupils with whom they worked were making good progress across academic and social learning, and that this had happened gradually over time as the child became more familiar with the school, but also as the practitioner had developed in terms of their professional practice. A teaching assistant described how an outreach team specialising in autism had provided her with advice, but that it was getting to know the child and falling into a routine in terms of actions that supported her sense of competency as a professional:

> *I was putting into practice, or doing my best to put into practice, what they [the outreach team] were teaching me to do, but all I felt was that I was making this poor child miserable. I used to go home and feel I can't do this, I'm not helping her, I'm making it worse for her. But [over time] I became more comfortable and fell into a pattern. We got to know each other and things started working well.*

Important professional knowledge also existed in relation to the group of children of which the autistic pupil was part, as well as the particular culture that operated within the school setting and the educational purpose of daily learning activities. This was seen as context-specific knowledge that ultimately ensured the

successful inclusion of the pupils in question. Specialist knowledge was viewed by some as limited in this respect, being too general in nature, or alternatively, finite in scope and already fully absorbed. The SENCO, who had many years of experience of working with autistic pupils, described changing professional development needs in her setting in this way:

> *At the beginning I depended heavily on specialist teacher advice, the type of generic advice about visual timetables, now and next, chunking tasks into very small steps, making sure that children had visual timers like sand timers, routines that are adhered to, any changes to routine that they're prepared well in advance for. But they're quite generic those types of strategies and most of them are already in place. We apply these strategies now immediately to all children and use them throughout the school quite effectively. What staff need to do is talk to somebody about their individual child.*

A stronger sense of identification with a community of knowledgeable practitioners within a school was apparent for all participants. Important knowledge about practice was felt to be generated from discussions within a setting, for example, with the SENCO. One teaching assistant commented:

> *As time has gone on, my understanding has got better of course and things like day courses have helped with that, and training and keeping a good relationship with the SENCO. If ever I have any problems or think, oh I don't think I'm doing this right, or should I do this or should I try this approach, I always go and have a chat with her.*

Some participants used the term 'team' to describe their practice and noted that informal conversations on an ad hoc basis with colleagues who also knew a child well were most useful in supporting effective practice. One class teacher described several colleagues as being involved in ongoing discussions about the autistic pupil she had in her class:

> *I have lots of discussions with the TA about how the pupil has done in certain activities because obviously she is primarily with him. We do swap around, so*

sometimes he is working with me or he's working with our other teaching assistant, but I also speak a lot to the SENCOs and get their advice on how to tackle things and what to do next.

Important knowledge about practice comes from practice itself and reflection can be used to gain a better understanding of children's learning

A key source of knowledge about practice was the ongoing interactions that took place on a daily basis between practitioners and pupils. Teaching for all pupils was described as concerning momentary judgements and taking actions based on these that resulted in an accumulation of experiential knowing over time. Experimentation was described as an important practice that allowed ideas to be tried out and information about the child and their abilities to be gained. This was something that was seen as applicable to supporting autistic pupils too. As one teaching assistant put it:

You've definitely got to be patient and you've got to try and find the pupil's level of understanding and then work with what you've got. To be honest, I don't know how I sort of work through the strategies, it just seems, right okay, this little boy isn't coping with that very well so we'll try something else. A lot of it is just thinking, okay that's not working so let's try this tactic, and really thinking on your feet.

Several participants noted the importance of carrying out ongoing and careful assessments of pupils, describing this as something that was part of ordinary practice. Understanding a pupil and what was appropriate in terms of learning support could come from past experiences of pupils with similar needs, but this could be over-ridden by careful assessment of the pupil in the here and now. One teaching assistant, who was a trained nursery nurse and experienced in early years education, described using child observation in an informed and alert way to gain deeper understanding of the ways in which a child is making sense of the world. She described how the pupil with whom she worked had begun to make hand gestures the meaning of which she found hard to apprehend. She described her thinking about this as a process of creating and rejecting possible meanings, commenting:

Dad says, he's calculating, you mustn't stop him from doing it, but I don't think he is. He sometimes counts, but he doesn't seem to be calculating because these [finger movements] are getting more and more complex, he's adding to them all the time.

What is evident in this practitioners' account was that a state of not fully understanding a pupil, though not a comfortable space to inhabit, was nevertheless seen by her as necessary to her role of educator. Several practitioners used the term 'reflect' to describe how experiential knowing gained from teaching and learning required reflection as a way of achieving a more complete state of knowing about the meaning of pupils' responses. Importantly, reflection could produce realisations about children and their learning that validated what the practitioner was doing, in the way that this class teacher described it:

Because sometimes you reflect and I see little things now, little sparks or moments where he'll just come out with something and you think, oh yeah, he is actually learning something.

Taken together, an important understanding underpinning practitioners' accounts was that being an effective practitioner partly involved positioning oneself as someone who does not fully know about children and how they make sense of the world. Many participants referred to the importance of assessment processes in relation to this point seeing these as providing them with the possibility to greater insight into children's responses within learning activities. Professional learning which occurred over time and supported the development of effective pedagogical actions was another way in which practitioners constructed themselves as developing their professional knowledge.

Principles of practice are aligned with a process-driven curriculum and social constructivist view of learning

Data analysis strongly indicated that the professional knowledge landscape in which participants located themselves was closely aligned with the idea of a process-driven curriculum. A process-driven curriculum puts emphasis on processes of learning that

are experiential, dialogic and inquiry-based learning. It takes as its starting point the child and their understanding and takes a view of education as concerned centrally with development in addition to curriculum content and subject knowledge. Planning comes from making careful assessments of children's understandings and the ways in which they are engaging with learning, with curriculum content tailored to this. One teaching assistant described such an approach in the following way:

> *You've got to try and find their level of understanding and then work with what you've got…Children are different aren't they. But our job is to teach them and to get them engaged and focused, you know reach their potential. And you want to do that with every child.*

A key concept was that of making children feel sufficiently comfortable to learn. This involved giving them a sense of control over what was to be learned, for example, by explaining it clearly to them before the commencement of an activity, as well as checking their understanding and ensuring they were happy and willing to engage:

> *Support for learning is about making sure that children feel comfortable in the group. Making sure they're comfortable and they're happy and they understand what they're doing. Not to make them feel any different to any other children because I think it's important that they feel they are part of the group and they're not being isolated or drawn out particularly.* (Teaching assistant)

Pupil well-being and the accessibility of the curriculum were seen as essential conditions that supported good pupil progress. The success of the mainstream placements of the autistic pupils in question was attributed by many participants to practices that made this possible:

> *We really need to boost pupils' self-confidence and make them feel good about themselves and look for ways of giving them lots and heaping on the praise. Even with [autistic pupil], who's very challenging in his behaviour and likes to follow his own agenda, if you give him a little bit of praise, he changes his whole demeanour.* (SENCO)

Forming positive relationships with pupils was mentioned as critical in this respect. As the SENCO commented:

> *It is all dependent on that relationship. If the quality of the relationship is good then it means pupils make huge steps forward, you see lots of progress.*

An important feature of positive learning relationships was recognising the differences between pupils since this allowed learning to be personalised and properly focused on individual understandings and needs. Several participants described effective practices in terms of acting respectfully towards children, listening to them, and valuing what they said and did. Listening involved giving children time to ask questions and talk about their interests, but also following children's own queries and concerns. One teaching assistant described how she prioritised listening to a pupil talk about their interests:

> *I think sometimes you need to let him get it off his chest because it's important to him. He might go on about it a bit, and I do say, it's not time now for talking about cars, and he's fine with that. I think it's important for him to be able to talk about what he likes.*

Several participants mentioned enabling children to become active learners as one of the goals of their professional practice and this seemed aligned with a social constructivist view of learning. The notion of scaffolding, for example, was evident in several practitioners' descriptions of children's active and independent learning. Many described using different kinds of supports to scaffold children's thinking about a topic, including discursive supports, such as simplifying the verbal instruction for a task, and material and organisational supports, such as supporting verbal information with visual information. Social-emotional supports to maintain engagement, such as offering a pupil reassurances and praise, were also highlighted. Learning supports used with the autistic pupils were not singled out as especially different from those used with other pupils and were described in everyday terms. For example, participants referred to using a whiteboard to write out examples of a task, repeating something, using counters for maths, looking at pictures in books, offering prior

warnings, offering emotional reassurances and building positive relationships. It was notable that terminology typically associated with autism and education, such as visual prompts, visual timetables, choose boards, communication groups and social skills training, was mentioned minimally and only in relation to input received from specialists in autism.

Inclusion is conceptualised as pupils with special educational needs accessing the same processes of learning as other children

As with other pupils, the progress of pupils with special educational needs was described by participants as contingent on their access to learning and engagement with tasks, with practitioners' ability to support them in this also seen as critical. Pupil behaviour was mentioned by some as an issue for learning engagement, non-compliance with practitioners' expectations or instructions being seen as an important barrier to learning. A teaching assistant described the successful placement of the pupil she supported as contingent on the fact that he was a well-behaved child who conformed to ordinary classroom expectations and never purposely challenged the authority of the teacher. This fact, she explained, allowed her then to follow him in terms of his learning and interests:

> *I haven't had any behaviour problems with him. So I just go with the flow and I just think of how I can use my ideas to try to turn his interests into something different so it broadens his way of thinking.*

One teacher described her role as partly about making assessments of a child's behaviour. This was to judge whether it was meant as a challenge to her authority or the result of the pupil's autism, in which case greater flexibility on her part was demanded:

> *Just understanding the effects of autism and allowing for this, but also setting high standards for him. And obviously taking into account, yes he will struggle with certain things, and we have to pick our battles a bit, but letting certain things go that with another child you wouldn't.*

Inclusive practice was described as concerning the establishment of favourable environmental conditions that supported the holistic development of a child. Measures of progress included not only development in terms of understanding and following instructions, but also interacting more with others, playing with them, being happy in school and becoming more confident. The sense that the child could be adequately supported was a consideration here and might involve supporting the individual child, but could equally involve the practitioner developing their own skills, understandings and confidence, as well as managing expectations within the peer group. A teaching assistant described the child she worked with as doing well in school in terms of his participation in group learning activities, but also how this involved her managing the responses of his peers:

> *He wants to get involved in everything. He doesn't care, he'll have a go. He even puts his hand up to ask questions. It will be about what's going on, but sometimes I just ask him, what are you going to ask. I don't want the other children to laugh at him. But most times he knows. He'll just say it and ask.*

Some participants expressed their belief that some aspects of pupil functioning were an enduring part of a child and something they did not expect to change. The sensory processing needs of a pupil or need for routines were described in this way: as issues that need to be managed with no expectation that the pupil would overcome this aspect of their psychology. A distinction was made by some participants between extra support activities which were linked to narrow targets identified by a child's individual education plan (IEP), and more open-ended and important educational aims that involved tasks which could be differentiated, but were essentially the same for all pupils. A teaching assistant described an individualised motor programme she used as 'little skills work' that gave her pupil a break from classroom learning:

> *If it's handwriting practice, I'll take him out of the class. He is also part of the Language Links group as well and will go out in the afternoons for that. So that's another little break. With his writing, we practice the Speed Up programme – we call it his 'little skills'. We've done a few of the exercises and I find if you repeat things with him he likes to know what's going to happen and he will do it. So with his writing, it's just messy, but we're trying to control it and it is getting better.*

By contrast, ordinary classroom tasks involved more substantial educational aims in the sense that they focused on access to a common curriculum, the development of understanding, and academic learning. For the same pupil, the teaching assistant described using dialogic teaching to support the development of his ability to communicate ideas:

> *To get the ideas out of him you've got to keep asking the question to prompt him. I do find like in literacy, if we're talking about a story, and I'll have to say, what happened next. He'll say, oh she opened the door, and I'll say, well what happened when she opened the door. I've got to ask the questions to get the answers out of him to get the writing.*

Interestingly, this teaching assistant did not express this pupil's needs as 'communication', probably because he talked to her all the time and they enjoyed a very positive relationship. Nor did she see that he needed to develop in terms of 'social behaviour' since she viewed him as well-behaved, responsive to direction and eager to please. Other children's social responses were described by her as an issue, however, especially if they demonstrated unkindness or lack of tolerance of others and were unresponsive to adult direction in this respect.

Discussion and Conclusion

This small-scale study explored how mainstream practitioners constructed their pedagogical practices in relation to autistic pupils who were considered to be achieving well and flourishing within the mainstream setting. Participants included class teachers, teaching assistants, a special needs teacher and a special needs coordinator, all of whom were working at the time of the research with at least one pupil on the autism spectrum. Findings indicate that, though specialised knowledge about autism was welcomed by participants and described as helpful in the initial stages of working with a child, effective pedagogical practice was seen to be based on ongoing interactions with pupils and experiences gained from positive learning relationships. The features of good practice that were highlighted as important, including getting to know a child, establishing supportive relationships, providing

support flexibly and working collaboratively with other school staff, reflect related findings in previously published research. In her study of autistic pupils' experiences of mainstream education, Wood (2019) found that acceptance of the child and a focus on the formation of positive relationships were aspects of effective pedagogy. Similarly, Lindsay et al. (2014) found that mainstream teachers prioritised building rapport with autistic pupils, working flexibly and creatively, and making decisions about support as part of a team. Autistic children and young people also emphasise the qualities of school staff and experiences of relatedness for positive learning experiences in schools, specifically, practitioners getting to know a pupil well (Sainsbury 2009; Williams and Hanke 2007). Good teachers are described by autistic children as active listeners who are fair but flexible, and who consider relatedness as a critical aspect of learning (Saggers 2015). For participants in this research, it seemed that any problem within interaction was seen as a shared one, something that is also highlighted in current understandings about good practice in relation to autistic pupils (Martin and Milton 2018).

Approaches to support identified by this research did not differ from those used with other pupils in the school setting and were described in relation to local rather than specialised discourses. Findings from this study reflect, therefore, what has been highlighted elsewhere in the literature on inclusive education, for example, in relation to the limitations of specialised knowledge in mainstream settings (Elwood and Murphy 2015), the importance of the school as a source of knowledge and support (Ellis and Tod 2014) and the need to see pupils as full participants of learning communities (Rix et al. 2009). Inclusion as a concept seemed to operate for participants in this study in the way it is currently understood, namely, as an orientation to the different ways in which pupils engage with learning and the creation of contexts for learning that support the participation of all (Black-Hawkins 2017). Inclusive pedagogical principles that focus on everyone, co-agency and trust (Hart and Drummond 2013) appeared to be important. For example, participants appeared to trust that all learner activity was purposeful and in search of meaning and saw evaluation and adjustment of their own practices as a necessary part of practice. It is perhaps notable that participants spoke more confidently about themselves as practitioners who had learned what to expect from a pupil and how to respond, and

this was in contrast to less confidence in their position as someone in receipt of information about autism from external specialists.

For these practitioners, questions of identity – who I am as a professional and what I understand about my role – appeared to be associated with broad educational aims (Harðarson 2017). This is in contrast to narrower aims that often operate for autistic pupils, for example, aims focused on the development of discrete skills in social communication (Anagnostou et al. 2015). Practitioners acknowledged their pupils' IEP targets, but saw these as secondary to more important aims that included access to a common curriculum, pupil activity as a learner, and pupil understanding, well-being and personal growth. Deterministic beliefs about children as a 'problem' within education (Hart and Drummond 2013) did not seem to operate. The way in which behaviour was understood by participants was notable in this respect since pupils were not judged in terms of behaviours typically associated with autism, such as interactional difficulty or reduced cognitive capacity (Donnellan et al. 2013). Professional knowledge in this study seemed more aligned with conceptualisations of practice that put relationships at the heart of effective pedagogy (Florian & Beaton 2018). Effective practices were described in terms of openness to the other, individual responsiveness and willingness to experiment, with a further feature described as a disruption of ongoing professional sense-making that leads to uncomfortable feelings of 'not knowing' but ultimately results in sounder pedagogical judgements (Florian & Graham 2014).

Undoubtedly, the communication differences of autistic pupils have meant such a view of education has been historically judged as irrelevant, though the issue of children's overlooked competencies problematises this stance (Dindar et al. 2017). As Yergeau (2018) points out, autism is a storied condition that promotes a narrative of deficit judged against a normative framework, but this narrative did not appear to operate strongly for these mainstream practitioners. Instead, the narrative was one of seeing learners as persons, respecting difference and supporting the realisation of individual potential in varied forms, something that was desired for all pupils. Clearly, understanding a pupil and understanding autism remain issues within education, but an implication of this research is that the notion of providing mainstream practitioners

with a knowledge background without proper regard to important features within their own landscapes of practice needs careful re-examination.

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